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## RELATIVISM IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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### Abstract

This study is going to investigate the problem of relativism in the writings of Karl Mannheim and David Bloor. These two scholars are important confessors of the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim began to apply the notion of relationism instead of relativism. Some critics believed to understand this object, others talked about the lack of real differences. My first aim is to differentiate these notions and to provide acceptable reasons why Mannheim chose relationism. The second question I want to answer is what David Bloor meant by relativism. Is he a traditional relativist, or does he use the methodology of relationism though he is not explicit about it?

*Keywords:* relativism, relationism, sociology of knowledge, sociology of science.

‘so liegt die Wahrheit des Bewußtseins  
darin, daß es niemals daneben greift...’

Karl Mannheim

### 1. Sketching the Problem

Debates on the problem of relativism have seriously strengthened with the appearance of the sociology of knowledge at the end of 1920s. The discipline originated from Karl Mannheim who kept escaping from different political regimes during all his life. He may have been the first scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who did not hesitate to pose the question: why are we afraid of relativism so much when we had better make it our best friend? But Mannheim did not stop at the point of facing relativism, he went further and elaborated the concept of *relationism*. This latter one is still seriously debated whether it is really something very different or not.

Since Mannheim pointed out the differences between relativism and relationism, this topic emerged in the after-war history of sociology. From the early 1970s, David Bloor, Barry Barnes and the other members of the Edinburgh School refreshed both the classical sociology of knowledge and the problem of relativism. They managed to widen the applicability of the discipline. In spite of Mannheim’s disapproval of the sociological explanations for the exact sciences, David Bloor

posed the question: Why not? Why should we exclude e.g. the mathematical knowledge from the sociological investigations?

Both Mannheim and Bloor use the word 'relativism', but are they really talking about the same notion? And what about Mannheim's relationism? These are the central questions I pursue answer in this study.

First, I evoke what Mannheim writes about classical relativism and then I try to sum up what he means by relationism. It is not explicit but, I think, it can be made explicit. Then, I hope I can point to the differences of the two concepts. Second, I'm going to investigate David Bloor's writings on relativism and I will try to compare it with Mannheim's terminology. My thesis is that Bloor gradually became a relationist. Third, I want to see why David Bloor accepts a sort of realist position today.

## 2. From Relativism to Relationism

Here I want to detail three types of relativism that are determined by the history of philosophical thinking: ontological, semantic and epistemological relativism.<sup>1</sup> Once we investigate the sociology of knowledge we need to consider only the latest one. Epistemologists differentiate also three basic kinds in relativism: knowledge relativism (KR for short), observational relativism (OR for short) and methodological relativism (MR for short).<sup>2</sup> Most of these values are accepted by the sociologists of knowledge.

First, we need to present short definitions for these epistemological relativisms in order to shed light on whether the mentioned sociologies of knowledge are relativist or not, and if they are, then in what sense. KR means that 'what is known or believed is relative to a person, culture, framework or whatever'; OR 'arises naturally in certain views about the nature of perceptual reports'; MR 'arises with the claim that there is no theory of scientific method (or a methodology in any form of inquiry), or there are no rules of reasoning, especially evidential rules, which can be accorded a special or privileged status over and above any other method or set of rules of reasoning'.<sup>3</sup>

We would also say for shorter that KR means that there is nothing like knowledge, there are only beliefs about the world; OR means that there is incommensurability at the observational level and that all observations are theory laden; and MR means that our rules of investigation can never be the only method. These are rather naked definitions but still applicable for our purpose.

First Karl Mannheim referred to the importance of this relativist methodology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So I would like to show the peculiarities of his theory in

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<sup>1</sup>Robert NOLA (1988) pp. 1–35.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.; I made these names of classification for short because R. N. only construed the categories. Here I do not want to detail the definitions he made, it is out of the task of this study.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

the following section. I would like to get to know why Mannheim has chosen relationism instead of relativism and what he meant by that.

Two works are important in the present case: the *Ideology and Utopia* (Ideologie und Utopie, 1929) and the *Sociology of Knowledge* (Wissensoziologie, 1931). These two writings were originally published at different times and places but nowadays English and German publishers consequently attach the latter to the later editions of *Ideology and Utopia*.<sup>4</sup> It can be taken to be a well-founded decision because one can better understand the earlier book after reading the short, latter study. So, I think it would be a needless effort to assess these two writings separately.

It seems to be a good way to understand Mannheim's relativism, first of all, to grasp the total conception of ideology. The total conception of ideology is 'the ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group, e.g. of a class, when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group'.<sup>5</sup> The main features of the total conception of ideology are the following: first, it does not rely solely on 'what is actually said by the opponent in order to reach an understanding of his real meaning and intention. ...The ideas expressed by the subject are thus regarded as functions of his existence'; second, 'the total conception calls into question the opponent's total *Weltanschauung*...'; third, the total conception refers to the theoretical or noological level; fourth, 'the total conception uses a more formal functional analysis ...[It] presupposes simply that there is a correspondence between a given social situation and a given perspective...'.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly this conception of ideology refers to the subject, even if it's individual or not, claiming that the subject's knowledge is determined by its social existence.<sup>7</sup>

Now, it is obvious that Mannheim adverted foremost to the importance of the *total conception of ideology* in the development of his sociology of knowledge. In the chapter on their historical perspective he concludes that the world of enlightenment created a new world existing only in reference to the subject. But if an investigator wants to see how this reference functions he need to look at himself as just another subject of this reference. And this is the root of Mannheim's relativism: a relativist state of the subject who cannot avoid the individualisation of the modern, but, at the same time, has no chance to stay alone with his thoughts. Almost nobody has any chance to separate ties and social bonds, but, as we will see, only almost.

From what follows, I think, it will be obvious that it was very important to reconsider these elements of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge so as to conceive what Mannheim calls *relationism*. To step forward let us pay some attention to the problem of 'false consciousness'. This notion has presumably originated in the modern critique of religious thinking of the Middle Ages. Most followers of the Enlightenment used this concept to demonstrate how religious thinkers misunderstood the meaning of truth in the world. Now, in its modern type, this became a

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<sup>4</sup>Karl MANNHEIM (1985)

<sup>5</sup>K. M. *ibid.* p. 56.

<sup>6</sup>K. M. *ibid.* pp. 56–58.

<sup>7</sup>See also K. M. *ibid.* pp. 266–286.

central element of 'a methodical procedure resting upon scientific demonstration'<sup>8</sup>. And this procedure is the relationism itself. The denial of the truth of consciousness is not simply a statement anymore but a serious critique claiming strict demonstration. And when we begin to apply this method to our own thinking then we are very close to think reflexively. *Reflexive thinking* emerges as a consequence of the age of uncertainty and doubtfulness, the only fruitful historical viewpoint and, last but not least, the most essential method used by the free-floating intellectuals (*freischwebende Intelligenz*). This is the method of re-questioning the world, and of what was seen as a matter-of-course part of it. As Mannheim writes: '...the general form of the total conception of ideology is being used by the analyst he has the courage to subject not just the adversary's point but all points of view, including his own, to the ideological analysis'<sup>9</sup>. The analyst of society naturally needs a scientific method to do his job and he himself is the only person who can elaborate this methodology. Additionally his scientific and social position requires a relativist method. He evidently chooses relativism making it stronger by the social perspective. From this point the philosophical relativism became sociological one, the pure relativism became historical and *methodological* one. This is the birth of relationism.

It is Gregory Baum who is an early investigator of Mannheim's critic against pure relativism. As he writes: 'Relativism, in the eye of Scheler and Mannheim, was a dangerous human attitude that would eventually turn into scepticism and its product, social apathy.'<sup>10</sup> But Mannheim did not want to see the building of social institutions to be ruined. He wanted something else: a new methodology for more sophisticated social investigations.

I have already emphasized that the sociology of knowledge is rooted in the simple theory of ideology, and it attempts to discover the 'situational determination' (*Seinsgebundenheit*) of all forms of thinking. This results in a new kind of history of ideas that owns the ability to investigate historical cases from a radically new point of view. Thus the sociology of knowledge is either new for the disciplines of the social sciences and philosophy or for the historiography itself!<sup>11</sup> It also shows that this kind of relativism has already broken the traditional walls of philosophical relativism.

We have two solutions to the problem of what constitutes reliable knowledge: *relationism* and *relativism*. As we will see we must never confuse them. According to Mannheim, '[r]elativism is a product of the modern historical-sociological procedure which is based on the recognition that all historical thinking is bound up with the concrete position in life of the thinker'<sup>12</sup>. But this concept is still connected to an *old type of epistemology* 'which was as yet unaware of the interplay

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<sup>8</sup>K. M. *ibid.* p. 70.

<sup>9</sup>K. M. *ibid.* p. 77.

<sup>10</sup>Gregory BAUM (1997) p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>For a detailed description of its historiographical character, see Helge KRAGH (1991 [1987]) pp. 58–60.

<sup>12</sup>K. M. *ibid.* pp. 78–79.

between conditions of existence and modes of thought, and which modelled its knowledge after static prototypes such as might be exemplified by the proposition  $2 \times 2 = 4$ .<sup>13</sup> Thus, by the help of this epistemology, one *can merely reject* every knowledge oriented to social situation as 'relative'.

So we will need a *new epistemology* to overcome this unfruitful situation. One must sooner or later realize that there is no absolute truth and knowing mechanism existing independently of the values and social contexts. Let us now consider the two types of the conception of ideology. (None of them belongs evidently to the relativism or to the relationism.) The first is the non-evaluative one: this historical view-point essentially leads to relationism. 'Relationism signifies merely that all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought ... We have, then, as the theme of this non-evaluative study of ideology, the relationship of all partial knowledge and its component elements to the larger body of meaning, and ultimately to the structure of historical reality'.<sup>14</sup>

The earlier non-evaluative conception of ideology finally results in an *evaluative* conception. Evaluation is not a mistake, says Mannheim, we need to exceed somehow. Simple philosophical relativism keeps itself away from evaluation. This intention, however, mustn't satisfy the sociologists. They want just to evaluate the society and the socially determined knowledge of its members. This objective results in an evaluative epistemology and in an ontological-metaphysical approach. And it is very important because 'empirical procedure (in the historical sciences, at least) can be carried on only on the basis of certain meta-empirical, ontological, and metaphysical judgements and the expectations and hypotheses that follow from them'.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the current sociology of scientific knowledge (and the new history of science) runs its investigations in right this spirit. Mannheim's most important advice is to express the hidden elements in our conscious, and not to hide what is otherwise conspicuous.

Finishing this detailed description of Mannheim's conception of ideology let us now summarize what he meant by relativism. Mannheim was struggling with the critics of relativism, he had to elaborate a new kind of relativism that defends the whole concept of the sociology of knowledge. He tried to exceed philosophical relativism that means a non-sociological, non-reflexive, non-methodological and accordingly non-evaluative relativism. It shows something but could not uncover the existential, social and cultural roots of knowledge. We must be careful to avoid this standpoint.

To adopt the right point of view is to apply the method of *dynamic relationism*. Instead of the pure, insignificant relativism, he moved toward the application of relationism: Mannheim added a *sociological perspective* to the pure cultural-philosophical one. He puts the analyst into the centre of his relativist conception and

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. pp. 86–87.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 89.; The English version of the text uses the term 'social sciences' instead of 'historischen Wissenschaften' as the German original does.

he puts him there as well in his later works on social *reconstruction*. The relativist himself is a real person who acknowledges the importance of a new epistemology. Only the *free-floating intellectuals* own the ability to separate what is ideological and what is not. They are not bound to any class but have common values and the same cultural background that keeps them together. They are not above any class but exist for the whole society to care for its culture. They have the great task to provide their own societies with an acceptable analysis.

Mannheim would like to avoid the so called 'sterile form of relativism' that is disregarding the sociological factors conditioning every product of thought. On the contrary, the sociology of knowledge, overcoming the mere application of theory of ideology, makes the existential determination of knowledge the only *methodology* for social and historical sciences. The relativist is a special actor in this world who applies the chosen relationist methodology (MR) and owns a new epistemology to evaluate historical and social knowledge (KR) resting in a free-floating position and thinking as reflexively as it is possible (OR).

According to Mannheim, there is no place for the sociology of knowledge in the history of exact sciences. We can talk about an earlier and a later period of knowledge in this case. Only the history of moral sciences [*die Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* – P. F.] is problematic because 'earlier stages are not quite simple superseded by the later stages'<sup>16</sup>. The knowledge set of the natural sciences evolves gradually, but that of the cultural sciences changes and develops in another way.  $2 + 2 = 4$  presents no clue as to when, where, by whom and why it was formulated, but the theories of social sciences mirror e. g. the schools affected them. 'In assertion of this sort, we may speak of an >infiltration of a social position< of the investigator into the results of his study and of the >situational relativity< (*Situationgebundenheit*), or the relationship of these assertions to the underlying reality'<sup>17</sup>.

The *relational procedure* can be well characterized with the case of the urbanized peasant boy. For the boy who was grown up as a peasant in a village, its culture is taken for granted. But the boy who left for the city can change his point of view and he ceases to see this rural mode of living and thinking taken for granted from a wider perspective. In a given group, something (e.g. a way of thinking) can be seen as absolute but out of that group (from another group) the same thing will be recognized as partial. The former peasant boy does not simply reflect the ways of thinking in his village as a 'homogeneous participant'. 'Rather he relates them to a certain mode of interpreting the world which, in turn, is ultimately related to a certain social structure which constitutes its situation'<sup>18</sup>. '[C]ertain mode of interpreting the world' means, in this case, an urban mode of thinking and the society in the background. The sociology of knowledge presents more than simple relativism in the systematic and conscious questioning of all intellectual phenomena. It is not a philosophical relativism but a practical, sociological one. Mannheim's simplest

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid. p. 271.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. p. 272.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 282.



definition is that '[r]elationism does not signify that there are no criteria of rightness and wrongness in a discussion. It does insist, however, that it lies in the nature of certain assertions that they cannot be formulated absolutely, but only in terms of the perspective of a given situation'<sup>19</sup>. Until this time the difference between relativism and relationism remained hidden for most scholars. Now that the differences have been made clear let us see what changes occurred in the later history of relativism.

### 3. Back to Mannheim?

In the 1970s the strong programme of the sociology of knowledge appeared in Great Britain. There are two points that made the sociology of knowledge stronger. The first is the *symmetry* thesis which says that the same kind of cause would explain true and false beliefs too.<sup>20</sup> Mannheim's theory suffers from the lack of this thesis because the other three theses (causality, impartiality, and reflexivity) can be found more or less in Mannheim's writings. Reflexivity is explicit, impartiality is apparent in the concept of the free-floating intellectual, and causality can be understood as the base of relationism.

The second point that makes this programme stronger is the acceptance of mathematical objects as social constructions. 'Mathematics and logic are collections of norms. The ontological status of logic and mathematics is the same as that of an institution. They are social in nature'<sup>21</sup> – asserts Bloor. Members of the strong programme have chosen beliefs of scientists as the only aim of their investigations but, at the same time, disregard everyday knowledge from their interests. Hereby a brand new discipline, the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) has been established. Thus for the first sight it must be a relationist conception as well as Mannheim's own theory. Then why does not Bloor use this term? Is he a real relativist at all? A deep investigation is still needed to answer these questions.

In 1976, Bloor was still a perfect relativist (as Mannheim would say: relationist).<sup>22</sup> He wrote as follows: 'There is no denying that the strong programme in the sociology of knowledge rests on a form of relativism. It adopts what may be called 'methodological relativism', a position summarized in the symmetry and reflexivity requirements...'.<sup>23</sup> It is obvious that Bloor accepts all forms of relativism: KR, OR, and MR too. For Bloor, KR means that there is nothing like knowledge in the world, there are only beliefs.<sup>24</sup> OR means reflexive approach of an independent relativist as for Mannheim.<sup>25</sup> And MR is nothing else but a simple relationist pro-

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. p. 283.

<sup>20</sup>David BLOOR (1976) p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>David BLOOR (1973) p.189.

<sup>22</sup>From this point I use the world relativism instead of relationism to speak the same language with the contemporary authors but, meanwhile, I still think of relationism.

<sup>23</sup>D. B. (1976) pp. 142–143.

<sup>24</sup>See *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>25</sup>See *ibid.* p. 5. (The fourth tenet of strong programme.)

gramme strengthened with the symmetry thesis, and the anti-Platonist world-view that means anti-realism in this case.<sup>26</sup> And this whole approach has been applied to the history of natural sciences. These features perfectly summarize the early state and endeavour of SSK.<sup>27</sup>

In 1982, David Bloor and Barry Barnes published a study concerning the problem of relativism.<sup>28</sup> Their primary goal is to present a relativist interpretation of their own. Three basic characteristics of relativism are determined: the first is that investigations of a given object result in different observations (OK); the second is that the appearance of a belief in a milieu depends on the circumstances of its agents (KR); and the third one is the symmetry thesis as I have already mentioned, and they add that in the case of all beliefs ‘regardless of truth or falsity the fact of their credibility is equally problematic’ (MR).<sup>29</sup> Barnes and Bloor couldn’t even conceal the eager relativism still streaming out from their writing. In the whole study, they are trying to defend this whole-heartedly accepted point of view against some rationalist philosophers such as Popper, Lakatos, Hollis and Lukes.<sup>30</sup>

From the middle of the 1990s David Bloor seems to admit realism but not the Platonic one he condemned before.<sup>31</sup> In his early writings, Bloor talks about the rejection of *Realism*. This realism means that there is something like a very abstract, very general, and very rigid truth in the world: namely, the world of Platonist mathematical objects are parts and bearers of the eternal truth. Bloor rejected this theory arguing that mathematical objects are just the same social constructions as all the other scientific (and non-scientific) theories in the world. For short, mathematical knowledge owns the same characteristics as the other forms of knowledge. They are social in nature: they are beliefs about the world. Let us now see if he changed his point of view in his later period, or not.

From 1996, Bloor writes about a so called *realist strategy* that helps people to “evaluate perceptions and observations, to select some as ‘good data’ indicative of ‘how things really are’, and to reject or formulate the rest as in some way flawed

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<sup>26</sup>See *ibid.* p. 5. (The third tenet of strong programme.) and D. B., *Wittgenstein and Mannheim on the Sociology of Mathematics*, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup>Additionally Bloor also accepts moral relativism: ‘There need be no such thing as Truth, other than conjectural, relative truth, any more than there need be absolute moral standards rather than locally accepted ones. If we can live with moral relativism we can live with absolute cognitive relativism.’ D. B. *ibid.* p. 143.

<sup>28</sup>David BLOOR – Barry BARNES (1982)

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>30</sup>Philip PETTIT accused the members of the strong programme with, as he writes, a conservative attitude when they don’t evaluate beliefs. He wants to liberate the SSK from harmful relativism. (See. P. P., *The Strong Sociology of Knowledge without Relativism*, in: R. N. *ibid.*, pp. 81–91.) Unfortunately he couldn’t realize that one cannot be a sociologist of knowledge without being a relativist. A so called value-free attitude may be the most important thesis of the sociology since Max Weber. One stops being a sociologist when begins to evaluate beliefs instead of explaining and trying to understand their social character. Pettit’s suggestion was a complete misunderstanding of the project.

<sup>31</sup>Barry BARNES – David BLOOR – John HENRY (1996) pp. 81–88.



or misleading”<sup>32</sup>. Scientists serve as the best example because they are perfectly able to grab the contrast between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, or ‘reality’ and ‘appearance’. They are the perfect appliers of this realist strategy: ‘[w]hat many eyes or many instruments agree on will be an observation of what is really there; what just one eye or one instrument observes, in contradiction to others, will be artefactual. Or at least this will be the usual realist strategy.’<sup>33</sup> We live in a world of objects we believe in, but objects are ‘out there’, independently of our belief. Realist strategist perceives a world constituted of objects he believes to exist within it, and this belief is getting deeper as it is strengthened by the similar observations and beliefs of other strategists. Scientist is such a strategist as well: he uses such beliefs to assort and reconstruct his data. Bloor says that scientists apply the same strategy as anybody else in everyday life. But I think Bloor unwittingly suggests something else.

All the scientists are realists in one way or another, says Bloor, and, consequently, the sociologist is probably one of them. Social scientists must act by the same *common-sense* realist strategy too. But social scientists get back to a special position with this conception. This position seems to be a return to Mannheim’s conception on the free-floating intellectuals. The intellectuals, the carriers and guards of knowledge, are the special strategists of the society whose task is to help people to evaluate the world existing independently of them. They own a feature that makes them to be capable of playing this mediator role. The feature means some kind of independency and it does not really matter if it is concerned with their free existential state (Mannheim) or with a special ability to rule and control knowledge (Bloor). Of course, sociologists use a common realist strategy (methodology) but they have the only systematized and official knowledge to explain the world and to draw attention to the relationship between reality and beliefs. He obviously shows this group of intellectuals as who more or less own a privileged position to affect what is known in the world. It’s not a free-floating position but undeniably a privileged one.

Bloor seems to separate the ‘unreality’ of numbers as creations of our collective mind from ‘real’ objects and artefacts. But why? Is there any real difference between these entities from a sociological point of view? The main difference is, asserts Bloor, that numbers are creation of the social mind (social constructions), not like everyday objects and artefacts that are given into our world by Nature independently of any social formation. I think Bloor stepped back in his defending of his strong programme.<sup>34</sup>

Nothing really changed, of course, there is no difference between them from a sociological point of view because natural and mathematical objects are the same concerning our beliefs on them. To contribute to the explanation of the problem of

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>34</sup>This is what Latour claims using the strong theses of the social constructivist tradition (STS). Latour esteems himself a realist thinker. He perfectly renewed the classical realist point of view but fell again in the gap of an other kind of relativism. Here I cannot detail this problem. See. Bruno LATOUR (1999) p. 120.

realism, Bloor points to the process of *reification*. ‘To reify, it is alleged, is to lose sensitivity to the rich complexity of appearances, and to cease transformation, and to impose a hypostatized representation on a cosmos in flux; it is to set limits on the extent of our awareness and to impoverish our imagination; it puts groundless constraints upon what we believe to be possible and thereby upon what we will attempt to bring about.’<sup>35</sup> We need a realist strategy to orient us in the world. We cannot live and understand each other without a realist mode of speech. This mode helps the scientist in the creation of their own sacralized objects. The pure essentialism turns into scientific sacralization: emerging as a defending reaction of scientists themselves. This is the importance of the realist point of view in the sociology of science. Those sociologists, says Bloor, who oppose realism deconstruct “scientific discourse and show how its theoretical entities are human inventions, rather than revelations of ‘what is really there’”<sup>36</sup>. But Bloor accepts a naive, *common-sense* realism asserting that “[w]hat we generally do in everyday life is to contrast theory and indeed speech generally with reality ‘itself’, un verbalized reality, whatever is ‘out there’ independent of perception, thought and word”<sup>37</sup>.

Consequently, he does not oppose his early rejection of *Realism* because this anti-Realism only widens the range of social constructions with mathematical objects arguing that these are only beliefs about the world. A *realist strategy*, however, is related to the everyday practice of (scientific) knower whose findings are controlled by this strategy. This is only a base for a better scientific orientation. The ultimate aim of the scientist is to present with the best estimation of the ‘real melting-point’. Bloor’s anti-Realism is a metaphysical standpoint of his own, but this realist strategy is a conception attributed to all scientists. Scientists simply think that theoretical entities like atoms and molecules are responsible for their observations and findings. They treat these theoretical entities as is commonly done in everyday life, they take them for granted. So one cannot charge Bloor with the loss of KR, OR, or MR, realist strategy is, as we have just seen, something else.

#### 4. How about this Relativism?

In 1999, Bruno Latour charged Bloor with being a relationist (relative relativist) but he hardly explains what he exactly meant by that.<sup>38</sup> Latour seeks to distance himself from relativism. He consistently treats relativism as a contrast to realism. Bloor answers that he doesn’t contrast relativism to realism (thinking of objects as realities) but to absolutism (thinking of a sort of knowledge as the only truth). Nature plays a central role in the formation of beliefs – says Bloor. Relativists are not defence lawyers, as Latour says, but philosophers of law who argue that “there are no absolute standards of justice, or no absolute ‘rights’ against which

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<sup>35</sup>D. B. *ibid.* p. 84.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 87–88.

<sup>38</sup>B. L. (1999) p. 120.

legislation may be assessed'<sup>39</sup>. Relativism doesn't mean that all beliefs are equally credible, repeats Bloor, it means that all beliefs have the right to face the problem of credibility.

Latour's answer is that he has no difficulty in accepting Bloor's relativism as being the opposite of absolutism. His criticism is only against relative relativism (or relationism) 'that sticks to the empirical task of tracing the establishment of relations'<sup>40</sup>. But, unfortunately, his argumentation stops at this point. Only the charge of absolutism appears in his writing again. Latour charges Bloor with accepting an absolutist position when he insists on keeping the difference between nature and society.<sup>41</sup> This distinction, consequently, equals relationism, and this relationism seems to be the same that Mannheim supported.

Bloor asserts that relativism is a fight against naturalisation: it means to teach scientists to say that they are having an interpretation of nature instead of saying that they know what nature is. But Latour esteems this effort as completely fruitless. He says that let us get rid of this useless relativism that is, as he makes it more precise, a relative relativism or, as Mannheim calls it, *relationism*, and he suggests to choose us another way (namely the STS) to rethink and rewrite the notion of 'nature'.<sup>42</sup>

The notion of relationism had been forgotten for a long time, however, its content lived on in the notion of relativism (that was, of course, not the same as philosophical relativism). But the theory of relationism survived the changes of sociology and recent researches still hang on to it. Mannheim construed sociological relativism (relationism), Bloor applied it, under the name of relativism, to his investigations of natural sciences. Latour is eager to exceed relationism but it is still a serious question if he manages to do it.

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<sup>39</sup>D. BLOOR (1999), p. 102.

<sup>40</sup>B. L. *ibid.* p. 120.

<sup>41</sup>This article concentrates only on the problem of relativism, here I can't investigate the validity of Latour's conception of hybrids. For more detail see B. L. (1993).

<sup>42</sup>B. L. *ibid.* p. 127.

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